

*Pony Express
Mail carrying*

UTAH

THE STORY OF HER PEOPLE

1540—1947

A Centennial History of Utah

By

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THE DESERET NEWS PRESS

29 RICHARDS STREET
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

1946

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Chapter 24

COMMUNICATION IN PIONEER DAYS

HOW MAIL WAS CARRIED

When the first groups of pioneers came to Utah in 1847 and 1848, there was no way to receive mail other than to have it carried by westward bound emigrant trains, or by men going from Salt Lake to the East. Brigham Young and his companions who returned to Winter Quarters in 1847 carried the first mail from Utah. The Saints who remained in the Basin sent letters with them to their relatives camped on the banks of the Missouri. It was but natural that the homeseekers trekking into Utah carry letters and word from relatives to those who had preceded them to the West.

In the winter of 1849 a post office was placed at Salt Lake City by the Federal Government, and a bi-monthly mail between Utah and Council Bluffs was established. Joseph L. Heywood was appointed to be the postmaster, and Almon W. Babbitt was engaged to carry the mail at his own expense. The following year, however, Samuel H. Woodson of Independence, Missouri, replaced Babbitt as mail carrier. He received \$20,000 a year from the government to run a monthly service by stage.

Woodson contracted with Feramorz Little, Ephraim Hanks, and Charles Decker, all of Salt Lake City, for them to carry the mail from Utah to Fort Laramie. They were to meet the mail from the East at that point on the 15th of each month.

These first contracted Utah mail carriers had many rare experiences. There were always the hazards of Indians, wild animals, cold weather, and swollen streams; yet they bravely faced those dangers and nearly always arrived on time with their mail.

One night, while on their journey eastward, Little, Hanks, and Decker put down their blankets in the road behind their wagon and went to sleep. The next morning while making preparations to continue on, Mr. Hanks

called to his companions and said, "Look! Here's some fresh tracks of a huge grizzly bear. He's been in our camp since we went to bed last night. We're mighty lucky that he didn't attack us."

"We're more than lucky, Hanks," replied Decker. "It's a miracle that we're still alive. And to think of our lying there sleeping so peacefully while that huge grizzly was walking around our heads makes me shudder."

"Those are the largest bear tracks I've ever seen," remarked Little. "I'm going to measure them." And the measurement showed that they were thirteen inches long.

Three of the mail carriers, Feramorz Little, a Frenchman named Contway, and an Indian named Yodes, nearly lost their lives in the winter of 1852-53. Early in December they left Fort Laramie for Utah with the mail. Little had put his ankle out of joint shortly before leaving. His foot was swollen badly by the time they reached Devil's Gate, and he was obliged to do camp duty on crutches. Levi Edgar Young says:

"The little company continued on until it began to storm. They were soon on a trackless wilderness of snow, with no guide marks but a few distant peaks which they recognized. Blinded by the drifting snowstorm, they wandered too far south and into what the mountaineers call the 'Bad Lands,' southeast of the South Pass. They were destitute of sagebrush or anything that would serve for fuel. The only vegetation was a short bunch-grass. This was sufficient to sustain the animals if they could endure the piercing cold wind.

"Night came on and a camp was made on a hillside. It was not only very cold, but the wind was blowing hard. The men were in danger of freezing, for it was impossible to make a fire. Their supper consisted of raw meat and a little bread.

"In the morning the storm was raging in all its fury. They packed their animals and traveled on, not knowing where they were. The snow was very deep, but fortunately they reached some timber before night, and camped in an old Indian lodge. About six feet of snow was cleared away and a fire made. After a good sleep they

lost only ten seconds in changing steeds. In fact, he had changed horses and was traveling again almost before his foaming pony had come to a standstill.

Since 250 miles had to be made per day, no surplus weight in rider or equipment was permitted. The lithe young man was allowed only a revolver and a knife for self-defense. The letters and telegraph dispatches were printed on tissue paper. These were wrapped in oilcloth and sealed in pouches, not to be unlocked until the end of the route was reached. The cost of postage was \$5 a half ounce in the early months of the service, but was later reduced to \$1.

The regular assignment was for each rider to carry the mail from sixty to seventy-five miles before being replaced by another rider. But sometimes the men were forced to do the assignment of two or three men without stopping.



PONY EXPRESS RIDER PURSUED BY INDIANS

Pony Bob (Robert H. Haslam) made one ride of 308 miles without leaving the saddle. The Indians had killed the men at the next station. He passed the burning ruins not only of that station but two others before he found a rider to take his place. Buffalo Bill once rode 321 miles without a stop, except for meals and change of horses.

Another famous rider was Thomas Dobson, a Utahn. One of his trips was a test of endurance and bravery rarely equalled in the history of the Pony Express. He traveled 322 miles. During the journey he was attacked

several times by Indians. Three arrows were shot into his horse and one into his own leg. It was only after the hardest riding and careful watching that he evaded the redskins.

The task of the pony express rider was very difficult. Horse and human flesh were strained to the limits. Night or day, under the darkest skies, in the moonlight, or with only the stars at times to guide him, the brave rider must speed on. Regardless of the weather, there must be no delay. In sunshine, rain, hail, snow, or sleet, the rider must put forth his best efforts at his hazardous task.

And the pathway he followed sometimes led across the level prairies, straight as the flight of an arrow. But more often the trail zigzagged, hugging the brink of a sheer precipice, or winding through a dark, narrow canyon. There the danger was ever present of being attacked by the watchful savages who were eager to take the scalp of the white man who dared to come into the mountains alone.

The Pony Express service was very popular in Utah. A number of young Mormons were among the most successful and fearless riders. Many of the horses for the service were reared in the Basin and sold to the company by Orin Porter Rockwell. He also ran the station north of the Jordan Narrows in Salt Lake Valley.

Brigham Young, with a few others and the operators of the *Deseret News*, organized a Pony Express club in Salt Lake City. Five hundred cash subscribers at ten cents each per week were listed. The purpose was to secure a duplicate of the California newspaper service. As soon as the rider arrived in Salt Lake, the *Deseret News* would get out "extras," giving the people of Utah the news of the Civil War.

The Pony Express did not last long—only one year and a half. The first rider left the Missouri River on Tuesday, April 3, 1860, at 5 o'clock in the evening. At the same time a courier left Sacramento. On April 7, the two riders met at Salt Lake City, as Utah lay in the middle of the route. The last rider completed the dramatic history of the Pony Express in October, 1861, at

the time of the completion of the telegraph across the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Coast.

THE TELEGRAPH

Edward Creighton was the man who connected the East and the West by telegraph. After building the first line that brought Omaha in touch with the outside world, he set his heart on building a line to the Pacific Coast. He came to Utah by stagecoach and received the support of Brigham Young. Then he traveled on to California where he obtained the promise of the California State Telegraph Company to build the western end of the line.

The erection of poles and stringing of wire began immediately upon Creighton's return to Omaha in the spring of 1861. In six months the job was completed. On October 17, 1861, Creighton's line reached Salt Lake City from the East and a week later the California company completed its line from the West to Utah.

The Mormon settlers of Utah did much of the construction work of the telegraph line, Brigham Young being one of the contractors. Under his direction, timber for the poles was hauled from the canyons. Many large wagons from Salt Lake City carried the poles and supplies to the workmen in Wyoming.

Soon after the completion of the transcontinental telegraph line, a group of Utah men organized the Deseret Telegraph Company for the purpose of connecting the Mormon settlements with the capital city. Brigham Young was head of the company. He sent a circular letter to the bishops early in 1866, instructing them to have the people unite with their money and labor in building a line from Rich County in the extreme northern end of Utah to St. George in the south. Men were called to work on the line without pay. The pioneers considered it a call to "go on a mission" in service to their state and church.

Captain Horace D. Haight's ox train, consisting of sixty-five wagons, arrived at Salt Lake City in October, 1866, bringing enough telegraph wire and insulators for a line 500 miles long. The materials were paid for with

money collected from the Utah people. By January of the following year telegraph messages were sent from Salt Lake to St. George. A. Milton Musser, who was superintendent of the Deseret Telegraph Company, reported: "We have 600 miles of telegraph in Utah in operation and material has been ordered to extend the lines in different directions. The territory of Utah is the only territory in the United States to own her own telegraph system."

Before the year 1867 ended the line was extended into Idaho. Thus telegraph lines crossed Utah from the east to the west and from the north to the south. The building of those lines throughout Utah furnishes a good example of the Utah pioneers' achievements through cooperation. It was the desire to progress and the spirit of cooperation that made possible this wonderful achievement in pioneer history.